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# Empowering Indigenous Mexican Groups Through Fostering the Practice of Traditional Textile Crafts

hoshiakari endo portillo  
*Ryerson University*, [hendo@ryerson.ca](mailto:hendo@ryerson.ca)

henry navarro  
*Ryerson University*, [hnavarro@ryerson.ca](mailto:hnavarro@ryerson.ca)

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## Empowering Indigenous Mexican Groups Through Fostering the Practice of Traditional Textile Crafts

Hoshiakari Endo Portillo, Henry Navarro Delgado

Ryerson University, Canada

Keywords: Mexican traditional, textile craft, swimwear, legacy, story-telling

Mexico is a country known for a rich diversity of traditional crafts that are directly linked to its national identity. Ana Paula Fuentes, the director of Oaxaca Textile Museum explained that Mexican arts and crafts are imbued with indigenous Mexican history, culture and identity (Garcia & Vinebaum, 2016, p.125). In a world where globalization and technology are at their peak, indigenous Mexican communities are struggling between the pull of their ancestral traditions and modernity. The access to technology indigenous Mexican communities have experienced, has "forced textile traditions to be abandoned or transformed" (Lavín & Messeguer, 2015, p78). They are caught between two antagonistic practices; there is a tension between mass produced and traditional hand-crafted textiles. The aim of the practice-led research discussed in this paper was to explore strategies for supporting the empowerment of indigenous Mexican groups through fostering their crafts.

Beginning with the Spanish conquistadors, back in the sixteenth century until our current days, indigenous Mexican communities have been negatively affected by colonization. Wilson (2004) points out that colonization processes have been about "civilizing" (p.360) indigenous groups, and this has put their cultural legacy at risk. Given the fact that Mexican crafts are part of the Mexican culture and identity it is important to preserve them. Throughout the study, I aimed to answer the following two questions; What would be the effects of indigenous Mexicans participating in the global fashion marketplace? and Which are the best practices or strategies for collaborating with indigenous Mexican craft people in an ethical and culturally respectful way?

This paper discusses the implications of incorporating traditional Mexican textile craft practices into products that are marketed in the global fashion marketplace. In addition, the paper analyses strategies to foster traditional textile crafts amongst indigenous Mexican communities in a respectful and ethical way. The creative outcome of the study was a swimwear capsule collection in collaboration with two indigenous Mexican artisans. Each piece from the collection conveys indigenous Mexican craft authentically. But more importantly, through the creation process I was able to outline some safe guidelines to effectively nurture the practice of traditional textile crafts in Mexico.

Moxley (2013) posits that through social work, art-making supports communities trying to survive oppression and in turn strengthens their cultural identity. My research proposes fashion design as the means by which indigenous Mexican craft people will increase their confidence and consequently empowering themselves. Furthermore, Navarro (2014) hybridized social practice and fashion in a theoretical model he called "Social Practice Fashion"(p.454). Therefore,

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Social Practice Fashion model was used as the overall theoretical framework to foster textile practices among participating indigenous Mexican artisans. In addition to collaborating with these indigenous Mexican artisans I utilized several qualitative data gathering methods that are based on advocacy/participatory research and storytelling. This included interviews with Mexican artisans and with one designer that works collaboratively with indigenous Mexican communities. Smith (2013) established story-telling as a project/methodology to improve or facilitate indigenous research. She points out that "new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (p. 144). Therefore, the story of each participant contributed to shedding light on the creative processes of indigenous Mexican craft people, how they have changed over the years, and how they approach collaborative work.

Each of the resulting swimwear pieces is imbued with stories, feelings and traditions, while simultaneously fostering Mexican crafts and ethical and sustainable practices. These outcomes proved the feasibility of incorporating indigenous Mexican arts and crafts into the global fashion marketplace, which is one of the main benefits of this research. Smith (2013) argues that indigenous people traditional knowledge can be introduced successfully into the marketplace, however she also points out how "selling that legacy is viewed by many activist as tantamount to destroying the culture" (p. 209). Based on my research I learned that including indigenous Mexican people in the fashion market place and "selling their legacy" may help perpetuate crafts traditions and may improve life quality of indigenous Mexican communities.

This study demonstrated some of the viable strategies that can be implemented so, indigenous Mexican communities can commercialize their traditional craft without endangering their cultural identity or negatively impacting their traditional legacies. Hence, the guidelines established in this research can be followed by Mexican indigenous to continue practicing their crafts within a contemporary marketplace without the fear of losing their authenticity. Most importantly, this study may be applicable to other ethnic communities experiencing similar challenges in integrating their traditional craft into a global marketplace as Mexican indigenous groups.

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